The most interesting surface maps

Chia-Yen Tsai

Department of Mathematics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

http://www.math.uiuc.edu/~ctsai6

History

In the 1920s and 1930s, J. Nielsen initiated a program to classify homeomorphisms of surfaces (up to isotopy). A complete classification was obtained by Thurston in the 1970s. Thus began an active research area in the study of surface homeomorphisms, especially pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms.

Surface homeomorphisms

Let $S_{g,n}$ be a hyperbolic surface with genus g and n marked points.

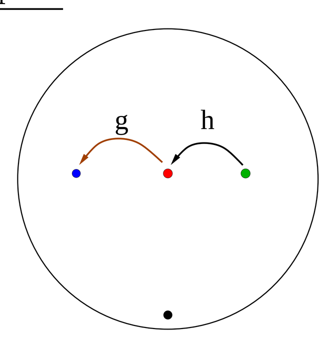
Nielsen-Thurston Classification

Any homeomorphism $f : S \to S$ is isotopic to either a finite order, reducible, or pseudo-Anosov homeomorphism.

1. **Finite order homeomorphism**
   If there exists k such that f^k =identity, then f is finite order.

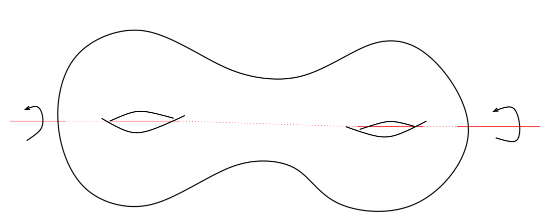
Examples:

1.



f = h g

2.

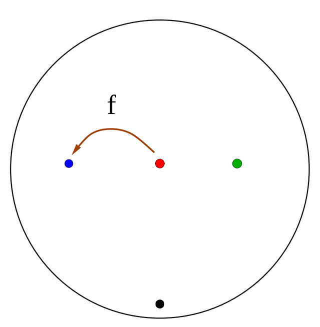


f= a rotation around the skew

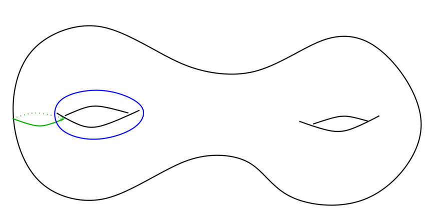
2. **Reducible homeomorphism**
   If there exists a reducing system $\alpha = \sqcup_{i=1}^{k} \alpha_i$ with $f(\alpha) = \alpha$, then f is reducible.

Examples:

1.



2.

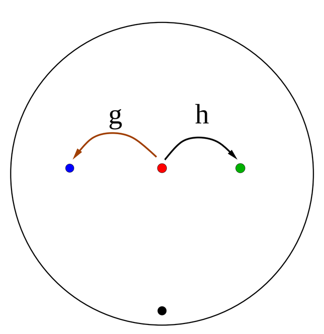


f= right Dehn twist on green
then left Dehn twist on blue

3. **Pseudo-Anosov homeomorphism**
   If f is infinite order and irreducible, then f is pseudo-Anosov.

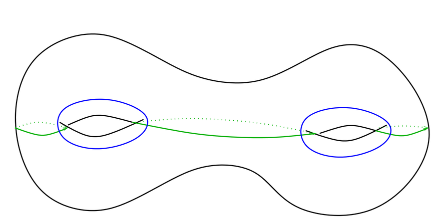
Examples:

1.



f = h g

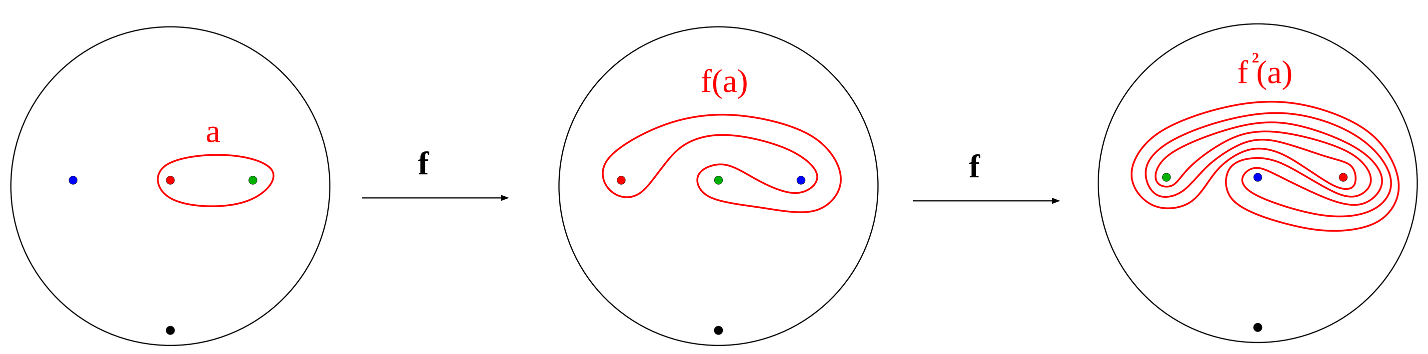
2.



f= right Dehn twist on green
then left Dehn twist on blue

What do pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms do to surfaces?

Choose a simple closed curve a and look at what happens after we apply f to a.

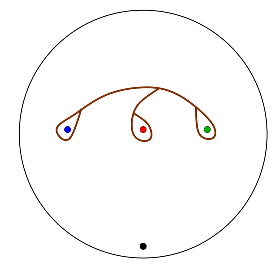


Notice that it is not easy to draw $f^5(a)$ directly.

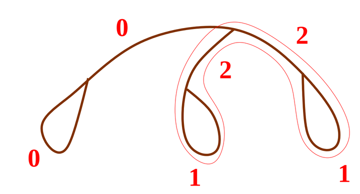
Tools for understanding pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms

Thurston's train tracks

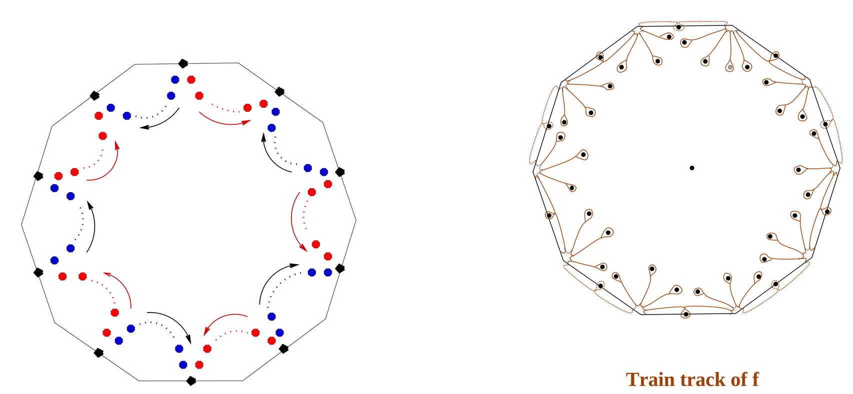
A train track τ of $f : S \to S$ is a "smooth one-complex" embedded in S with some non-degeneracy conditions. Below is an example of a train track.



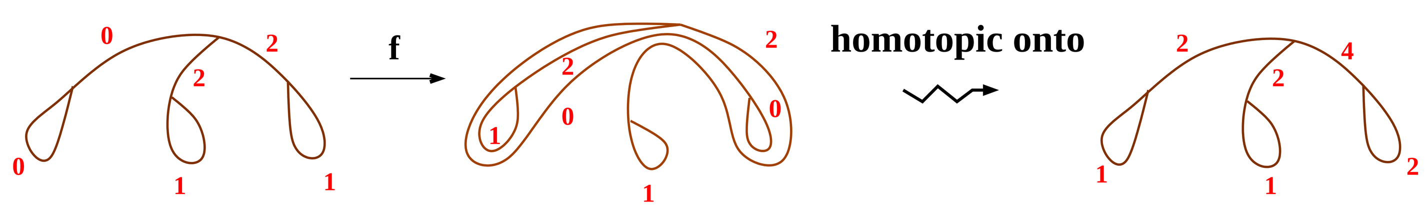
If $f : S \to S$ is pseudo-Anosov, then there exists a train track τ such that "$f(\tau)$ collapses onto τ". Note that f in Example 1 of pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms (in the left column) has the train track above. Train tracks can describe curves by weights. Here is an example. The simple closed curve a determines weights on the train track in the following way: If a has two arcs passing through a branch, then it has weight 2.



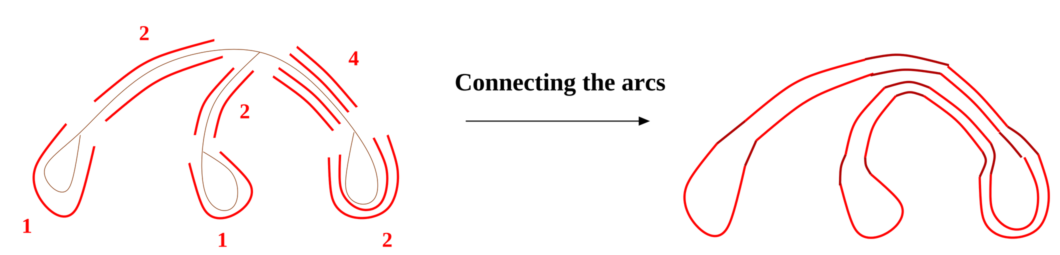
Remark: We can use train tracks to find the action on curves.
As we saw earlier, even when f is "simple", it is hard to directly keep track of what happens to the curve a under iteration of f. Most of the time pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms are much more complicated. For example:
$f : S_{2,n} \to S_{2,n}$ (following the red arrows then the black arrows)



Let's see how we can use the train track. First, the simple closed curve a determines weights on the train track. After we apply f, we obtain the new weights on the train track.



From the new weights we can recover $f(a)$. The weights on the branches tell us the number of arcs, which we then connect by following the tracks.



Dilatations of pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms

Theorem:(Thurston)
For any hyperbolic metric on $S_{g,n}$, and any pseudo-Anosov $f : S_{g,n} \to S_{g,n}$, there exists $\lambda(f)$ such that

$$\lim_{k\to\infty} \sqrt[k]{length(f^k(a))} = \lambda(f),$$

for any nontrival closed curve a.

We call $\lambda(f)$ the **dilatation** of the pseudo-Anosov map f.

Facts:

1. $\lambda(f) > 1$.
2. $\lambda(f)$ is the growth rate of the length of closed curves.
3. If f is isotopic to g, then $\lambda(f) = \lambda(g)$.
4. $\{\lambda(f) | f : S_{g,n} \to S_{g,n}$ pseudo-Anosov$\}$ is discrete (Arnoux-Yoccoz and Ivanov).

The asymptotic behavior of least pA dilatations

Since the set of pseudo-Anosov dilatations is discrete for each g and n, there is a minimal element of the set. We call it the least pseudo-Anosov dilatation, which is defined by

$$l_{g,n} := \min\left\{ \log\lambda(f) \middle| f : S_{g,n} \to S_{g,n} \text{ pseudo-Anosov} \right\}.$$

Known results

- **For closed surfaces**
  In 1991, Penner proves

$$\frac{\log 2}{12g-12} \leq l_{g,0} \leq \frac{\log 11}{g}, \text{ for } g \geq 2.$$

  These bounds has been improved by Bauer (1992), McMullen (2000), Minakawa (2006), and Hironaka-Kin (2006). The best known bounds are

$$\frac{\log 2}{6g-6} \leq l_{g,0} \leq \frac{\log(2+\sqrt{3})}{g}, \text{ for } g \geq 2.$$

- **For surfaces with marked points**
  In the same paper, Penner proves a lower bound for surfaces with marked points,

$$l_{g,n} \geq \frac{\log 2}{12g+4n-12}, \text{ for } 3g+n-3 > 0.$$

  He seems to suggest that there should be an analogous upper bound.
- **For spheres with marked points**
  Hironaka-Kin in 2006 show that Penner's conjecture holds for the sphere case by finding an upper bound

$$l_{0,n} < \frac{2\log(2+\sqrt{3})}{n-3}, \text{ for } n \geq 4.$$

  We can combine it with Penner's lower bound,

$$\frac{\log 2}{4n-12} \leq l_{0,n} < \frac{2\log(2+\sqrt{3})}{n-3}, \text{ for } n \geq 4.$$

Remark: The topology of a surface S is uniquely determined by its Euler characteristic $\chi(S_{g,n}) = 2-2g-n$. These results show that if we change the topology of the underlying surface, the least pseudo-Anosov dilatations will change. In particular, in the known cases it is proportional to $\frac{1}{\chi(S)}$.

Question: Does $l_{g,n}$ always go to 0 on the order of $\frac{1}{\chi(S)}$, which is the same as $\frac{1}{g+n}$? No!

The main theorem (Tsai, 2008)

Given genus $g \geq 2$, there is a constant c_g, depending on g, such that

$$\frac{\log n}{c_g n} < l_{g,n} < \frac{c_g \log n}{n},$$

for all $n \geq 3$.

Remark: For fixed $g \geq 2$, the asymptotic behavior of $l_{g,n}$ is like $\frac{\log n}{n}$, and not $\frac{1}{n}$.

Remark: The earlier example of $f : S_{2,n} \to S_{2,n}$ is the example which gives the upper bound of the theorem.

Ongoing projects

1. Get a smaller constant since our c_g is exponential in g.
2. For given n, what is the asymptotic behavior of $l_{g,n}$?
3. Find a sequence of pairs of g and n, such that $l_{g,n}$ is "large". There are examples of small dilatations for $n = g$, $n = g+1$ and $n = g+2$ where $l_{g,n}$ is on the order of $\frac{1}{g}$. However, the constructions do not work for $n = g-2$.
4. Find a general construction of pseudo-Anosov homeomorphisms with small dilatations.